



The case for Progressive Security

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**„Safety and security don't just happen.
They are the result of collective consensus and
public investment.”
– Nelson Mandela**

Part 1: An age of insecurity

The state of the world – Secure work and social standing, safe streets and territorial integrity, the assurance of a roof over one's head and food on the table: these are not much to ask for. But for many around the world, things look more precarious. We live in what has been dubbed an era of “polycrisis”, a term resurrected from the troubled 1970s, in which crises interact with and exacerbate each other to create threats greater than the sum of their parts. Economic shocks, technological changes, pandemics, the climate emergency, and conflict upon conflict

– be it Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, Israel's bloody retaliation against Hamas, or overlooked wars such as that in Sudan – have combined to create a widespread mood of insecurity. For progressives, whose political project draws on optimism about the future and faith in the power of common endeavour, it all makes for challenging times.

This epidemic of insecurity is well documented by various large-scale studies of public opinion. In 2022 the Lloyd's Register Foundation surveyed more than 125,000 people in 121 countries and found that 34% felt “less safe” than they did five years previously, up from 30% in 2019. In 2023, the Open Society Foundations polled over 36,000 people in 30 countries and found that 49% had struggled to put food on the table in the last year; 58% feared political unrest leading to violence in the next year; and 70% worried that climate change would have a direct impact on their lives over that same period.

This sense of insecurity is prevalent in high-income countries as well as lower-income ones. In the United States, Gallup polling shows that the share of Americans who fear walking alone at night is at its highest (40%) in three decades. Despite the booming economy, the 2024 round of Northwestern Mutual's respected Planning & Progress Study found levels of financial insecurity (34%) to be the highest in the study's 15-year history. Meanwhile, the mood in Europe was captured in a January study by the European Council on Foreign Relations, which divided the citizens of 11 representative countries into five "crisis tribes" based on the traumas that most affect their view of the future: the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war in Ukraine, immigration, climate change, and global economic turmoil.

This sense of a Hobbesian world is finding political expression in all manner of ways. In many places, it appears to be forging a harsher atmosphere and a zero-sum mood. The political scientist Jonathan White has argued that the spectre of a darker, more insecure future itself challenges one essential democratic mechanism: the assumption that victories and defeats alike are always only temporary.

"Problems of climate change, inequality, geopolitics and social change are widely viewed as so urgent and serious that [...] waiting for the "next time" is not enough. Every political battle starts to feel like the final battle, to be won at all costs."

The increasing harshness of the political atmosphere and the rise in online and physical attacks against politicians at all levels and across all parties – like those against the Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen and the German MEP Matthias Ecke, to name just two in recent weeks – should thus hardly surprise us.

But rising polarisation is not the only sign that the "end of history" proclaimed in the early 1990s was an illusion. Another, more fundamental illustration is the worldwide rise of authoritarian strongmen and the surge of hard-right and autocratic forces within Western democracies, as with Viktor Orbán's Fidesz-dominated Hungary, Giorgia Meloni's au-

thoritarian government in Italy, and the potential return of Donald Trump to the White House. Gains for the far-right at the recent European Parliament elections were just the latest example. We can view 2024, the biggest-ever global election year, as nothing less than a crunch moment for democracy and pluralism, with some leaders sacrificing those values on the altar of electoral expediency and others playing for high stakes, as seen on 9 June when France's President Emmanuel Macron called snap elections following a surge in support for Marine Le Pen's National Rally party. Put more dramatically: it may be that these pathologies symptomatise a deeper turning point in which the wave of insecurity finally tips the balance from liberal democracy to autocracy.

An age of insecurity might seem to be the natural realm of the political right – what we might call a Conservative Security, oriented around protection of the status quo and rooted in the appeal of hierarchy and tradition. In some of its more populist forms, this conception becomes a politics of outright stratification, coercion, and isolation: a Trumpian entreaty to "Build The Wall". We might thus assume that the politics of insecurity is innately infertile ground for progressives.

A progressive answer – We might. But should we? Progressive political traditions, too, have their answers to insecurity, albeit ones with a different emphasis. They tend to locate the sources of fragility less in the interdependence of individuals, classes, and nations per se than the failure to manage that interdependence. More contentiously, it might be argued that progressives concentrate more on the root causes of insecurity than merely on its most immediate manifestations. Progressive answers to those root causes – greater cooperation across sectarian and national divides, more cohesive and thus resilient economies and societies, and greater capacity for collective responses – deserve a hearing. As German chancellor Olaf Scholz has put it – most recently in his statement to the Bundestag on 7 June, and echoing Willy Brandt – "Ohne Sicherheit ist alles nichts". Without security, everything else is nothing.

Around the world, policymakers, politicians, and

thinkers are grappling with elements of that same sentiment, which add up to something larger: something we might call Progressive Security. This can be seen as a double-sided effort: 1) asserting that progressives can be entrusted with national security, where conservatives have traditionally had the upper hand, and 2) seeking at the same time to challenge the status quo by addressing the root causes of economic and social insecurity that align more naturally with the different traditions – liberal, social democratic, and green – of the progressive political landscape.

In an age of intensifying conflict, progressive leaders have been at the forefront of the new politics of geopolitical security. The two states that contribute most to Ukraine's self-defence against Russia's brutal full-scale invasion, the United States and Germany, are led by centre-left governments. Progressives such as Germany's Annalena Baerbock, France's Raphaël Glucksmann, and Estonia's Kaja Kallas were warning of the threats from revisionist autocracy long before 24 February 2022. (As Baerbock put it to Kallas in March 2024, "You warned us not to take our European security for granted".) In a number of countries, it falls to progressives to rebuild the military and intelligence-gathering capacity dismantled by budget-cutting conservative governments over the years. Meanwhile, the wider fracturing of the multilateral system, and the proliferation of conflict and associated norm-breaking, illustrates the tight links between high geopolitics and more traditionally progressive priorities such as human rights and global justice.

Defence – in the Progressive Security definition – needs a widened aperture. Beyond support for the defence industrial complex, the procurement and distribution of defensive systems, Progressive Security implies detailed diagnosis of systemic vulnerabilities and whole-of-society approaches to addressing these in an anticipatory framework to enhance societal resilience. In practice, this includes new strategies for securing the second promise of democracy – economic growth and sustainable prosperity. There, we are living through a gradual shift towards the beginnings of a new economic paradigm. In the US the

administration talks of a "foreign policy for the middle class" and what treasury secretary Janet Yellen has dubbed a "modern supply-side economics" focused on infrastructure and human capital. In Europe, the German government is driving a green industrial transition along with a higher floor for wages, and the prospective Labour government in Britain has proposed what shadow chancellor Rachel Reeves has called a "securonomics" fusing macro-economic stability with liberalised planning rules and industrial policy. Harvard economist Dani Rodrik describes a "productivist paradigm" emphasising socially and geographically dispersed economic opportunities, investment over finance, supply-side measures over traditional redistribution. This new paradigm is similarly shaped by an emphasis on the sustainability of labour markets, including the quality of jobs, a field where centre-left governments like those of Spain and Australia have – in light of rapidly advancing technological shifts - led promising reforms.

Building on this economic foundation, progressives are also articulating updated visions of technological and geopolitical security. Social democrats such as Magdalena Andersson in Sweden warn of hybrid threats such as disinformation. Germany's centre-left government and Britain's Labour are concentrating not only on the resourcing of law-and-order agencies but also deeper challenges such as the fragmented state of international policing and the role of kleptocracy, corruption, and dirty money. And progressives have been at the forefront of responses to the existential security threat that is the climate crisis – not only in politics but in other fields too, for example in the case of the thoughtful engagement by Isabel Schnabel, member of the Executive Board of the European Central Bank, with the monetary dimensions of global heating.

The above is far from being an exhaustive account of even the most prominent examples of Progressive Security in action (an equally non-exhaustive reading list is included at the end of this paper). But it does illustrate the degree to which various parts of the extended progressive family are recognising and grappling with the epidemic of insecurity: they are making links between its different parts, and reach-

ing towards a complex of solutions distinct in character, philosophy, and promise.

Clearly, there is much more work to do in knitting together progressives' thinking in this area and these solutions. This will involve asking deep questions about both the context of our times and the fundamentals of progressive politics. It will mean teasing out differences within the progressive camp and acknowledging difficult choices. But it is a task progressives cannot duck.

During the remainder of 2024 and in 2025, progressives will face a series of crucial electoral tests in France, the UK, the US, Canada, and Germany. The polls suggest that these elections will be challenging, to say the least. But there is much to build on. After a right-wing populist storm, liberal democracy is being restored in Poland under a democratic government that includes centre-left parties. And Labour is on a promising path towards firmly taking over governance of the UK after a 14-year spell of Conservative rule. In order to master these electoral tests, progressives must openly address the insecurity felt by many voters and prove that security can be a viable political pathway for renewing the promise of progress. The challenge is to continue challenging the status quo to achieve a better society amid a new reality of military threats and the hard choices that come with it in domestic politics. As we will argue in this discussion paper, there is a political space that can be claimed for progressives to provide security by combining the development of a credible, alliance-focused, and values-based defence, foreign, and security policy (cooperation) with the construction of a society that is equitable and rooted in collective security (cohesion) and strategic investments in the future (capacity). If progressives succeed in curbing insecurity, the economic, military-geopolitical, technological, and climate indicators all tell us that they will likely remain one of the defining forces of the mid-21st century.

Part 2: Elements of Progressive Security

The starting point of this task is to sketch out the contours of Progressive Security and what distinguishes it from the approach we characterised above as Conservative Security, and to begin reckoning with the main questions and tensions latent within it. These are the ambitions of parts 2 and 3 of this paper respectively. These parts are intended not as a concrete manifesto but, rather, as a stimulus to discussion, debate, and further reflection at and beyond the Progressive Governance Summit taking place on 21 and 22 June 2024 in Berlin.

So this is a practical exercise, not primarily a theoretical one. But it might help to dwell briefly on one aspect of theory: the relationship between Progressive Security and freedom. After all, the supposed conservative ownership of security as an issue is rooted in what Isaiah Berlin called the "negative freedom ... within which a man can act unobstructed by others". This form of freedom is sometimes ascribed to right-wing political traditions that are oriented around protection of the status quo, in which security is a protective wall holding back threats to that settled order. It contrasts with the "positive freedom" of being an "instrument of my own ... acts of will", as Berlin put it, which is more often associated with emancipatory, progressive politics and imagined being in tension with security.

But is that tension really so fundamental? Progressive Security says not. It asserts that security itself can be a foundation for emancipatory, capability-enhancing, positive freedom. Perhaps it draws on the republican tradition in political thought, and with it what Irish political philosopher Philip Pettit has identified as "freedom as non-domination". Neither a negative freedom-from-restraint nor an open-ended, positive "freedom to...", Pettit's republican freedom defines true liberty as freedom from unjust or morally illegitimate power. By implication, it frames security as a tool against domination of any form, be it by militaries or governments, mobs or corpo-

rations, or the dictatorship of economic, climate, social, or technological forces.

Protective and emancipatory at once, Progressive Security is thus more than a wall shutting out threats; it is also a hill on which capabilities can converge in the interests of cutting down those threats over time. It is more constructive and proactive than Conservative Security; more preoccupied with the deeper, long-term drivers of insecurity, from social inequity to autocracy to climate crisis; and more holistically concerned with the relationships between those drivers. Most of all, Progressive Security imagines security fundamentally as a function of three things: cooperation, cohesion, and capacity. It is worth considering each of these in turn.

Security as cooperation – Start with those images of the wall and the hill and reflect on the many ways in which global insecurity today is a function not of too much openness but of failures of coordination within and between societies. All too often its causes – destabilising financial flows, dirty money funding the drugs and weapons trades, the still-growing threat of terrorism, viruses, out-of-control technology, the climate crisis – ricochet around the world causing chaos while the institutions seeking to contain them remain largely confined to the national level. So Progressive Security means a renewed commitment to more ambitious and values-based cooperation at the regional, minilateral, and multilateral levels with the restoration of international peace as its main objective

But what sort of cooperation? Recent years have disabused progressives of many of the naive assumptions made about the world in the years immediately after the Cold War. Globalisation is becoming more fragmented and political. Economic dependency on autocratic systems bears a price tag that is too high to pay in times of crisis. Multipolar geopolitical competition is back as autocratic powers like Russia lay waste to old norms, and full-scale armed conflict returns to European shores and those of its near-abroad.

The polycrisis demonstrates daily that domestic pol-

icy and foreign policy are heavily interconnected. Russia's war in Ukraine, for example, has a tangible effect on physical security and also drives up Europeans' cost of living. That calls for a steely awareness of the harsh realities of this time – including the need for greater “hard” security via stronger defence and clearer red lines against autocracy – placed in the service of progressive goals and values. David Lammy, Labour's shadow foreign secretary, has argued for both “a politics based on respect for facts” and “a progressive belief in its capacity to champion multi-lateral causes, build institutions, defend democracy, stand up for the rule of law, combat poverty, and fight climate change”.

Security as cohesion – A politics of “them and us” is no way to deliver real, long-term security. It overlooks the extent to which the wealthy and powerful are themselves perfectly capable of jeopardising the security of a society, but, more fundamentally, it is a recipe for worsened inequality and polarisation across society as a whole.

Extensive research has shown that less equal societies almost invariably experience higher levels of drug abuse, violence, mental health problems, and criminality. Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett of the Equality Trust report that even the relatively modest difference in the Gini coefficient between Spain and Canada correlates with a 20% difference in crime rates. John Austin of the Michigan Economic Center and others have shown that deepening inequality between regions drives support for right-wing populists and stirs resentment among people who feel economically and culturally displaced, are suspicious of globalisation and trade, and mistrustful of democratic institutions. Little surprise, then, that polarising strongman leadership has been shown by researchers such as Kristina Lunz of the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy to contribute to even greater insecurity.

To be secure is not just to enjoy material well-being but also to enjoy the regard of one's fellow citizens (which is why studies such as Michael Sandel's *The Tyranny of Merit* and political framings such as Scholz's “respect” agenda are so important); to have

reasonable assurance that one's circumstances will not deteriorate unexpectedly (to be insured against risk is a good in itself); and to have a sense of belonging (hence the new emphasis in progressive thought on place and meaning rather than just market logic).

The fundamental centre-left insight still applies: economic prosperity and social justice are two sides of the same coin. But today, prosperity needs to be environmentally sustainable and consistent with the transformation required to tackle climate change globally. This involves prioritising both local and global climate protection, ensuring access to sustainable and affordable sources of food, and addressing environmental risks and preservation through decisive and concerted action at all levels of governance. All of these concepts of cohesion as collective security are the natural realm of progressives, and, combined, are a distinguishing hallmark of Progressive Security.

Security as capacity – The question of going beyond market logic is more than just a left/right issue. The crises of recent years have been an education in the value of spare capacity in all its forms. It is especially necessary for societies to be truly resilient in an age of extreme weather events, economic shocks, pandemics, and technological upheavals that demand permanent adaptation. It is also needed within supply chains to ensure that they can ride out disruption. And it is needed in a global trading system that can count less and less on smooth goods flows through uncontested waters.

All of this is a direct contradiction of the laissez-faire assumptions of past decades: the pursuit of short-term efficiency above all else, just-in-time supply chains, and the default assumption that the private sector always knows better than the strategic state or the “mission-oriented state” – a term coined by the economist Mariana Mazzucato. Progressives are leading an overdue reappraisal.

They can also do much to ensure that this rebuilding of capacity is done in a socially just way. Urgently needed investments in states' crisis response infrastructure, militaries and police forces, hospitals and

medical technological institutions, zero-carbon physical and industrial infrastructure, and climate-readiness should come not at the cost of existing social safety nets but instead from reforming draconian fiscal rules and asking the wealthy – who have enjoyed by far the largest share of income gains over past decades – to pay their share. Seen thus, policy priorities such as reform of Europe's Stability and Growth Pact and of Germany's economically illiterate debt brake, and international measures such as the new minimum global corporate tax rate, underpin Progressive Security policies too.

Part 3: Navigating new tensions

The cooperation, cohesion, and capacity points of the Progressive Security triangle are obviously closely linked. A “progressive realist” foreign policy, as Lammy puts it, can support domestic re-industrialisation and defence investment in ways that make societies more cohesive and expand their capacity to cope with insecurity. Greater cohesion at home makes for more confident cooperation abroad and broad-based support for capacity-boosting investments. Meanwhile, increasing state and industrial capacity, as the likes of Mazzucato have argued, makes a country more robust abroad and can contribute directly to greater respect and belonging and risk-proofed livelihoods at home: **tough on insecurity, tough on the causes of insecurity.**

But perhaps the most valuable thing that this paper can do is point out the tensions within Progressive Security and the questions that need to be answered for a confident and timely new turn in progressive politics to prevail. These are where the need for debate and interrogation is greatest.

1. What is Progressive Security? – Some of the questions concern the very fundamentals of the idea: Is Progressive Security really a useful framing for progressives?

2. What are the pros and cons for progressives, including at elections, of engaging in debates focused on security?
3. How much does the pace of change affect citizens' sense of security? Is faster, drastic change ultimately more or less destabilising than more gradual, drawn-out change?
4. How can we find better ways of measuring security as experienced by citizens?
5. To what extent is there a trade-off between preserving citizens' lived security while also upholding the flux that is central to open, democratic societies?

Other questions can be grouped into three categories that very roughly map onto the cooperation–cohesion–capacity triptych advanced in this paper.

Security as cooperation: domestic or global? – It is uncontroversial to say that cooperation is vital to curbing insecurity, a positive-sum game. But within that positive-sum game there are trade-offs. Take, for example, the American administration's Inflation Reduction Act, which has contributed greatly to global climate security and domestic economic security through its green industrial investments but risks sparking a protectionist arms race. Or take the progressive realism of the British Labour Party, which has not yet delivered a clear line on how to navigate the choice between human rights and pluralism on the one hand and necessary security relationships with authoritarian leaders on the other. There are challenges to navigate:

6. Which delivers more security in the long term: self-restraint in relation to revisionist autocrats in the interests of stability, or self-assertion in the interests of rules-based order?
7. Is it ultimately better for global climate security to invest more in decarbonising technology behind tariff barriers or to lower those barriers and pursue more multilateral green investments?
8. How should progressives faced with electoral pressures weigh long-term systemic forms of insecurity against everyday ones? How should they

navigate the trade-offs between employment security and the long-term energy transition?

Security as cohesion: change or stability? –

The same pattern applies when it comes to cohesion. It is right to treat this as a vital driver of long-term security – and long-term ability to adapt to insecurity. And yet it contains obvious trade-offs. People must feel a sense of safety and belonging in times that demand adaptation and flux. Societies must act as one in times when polarisation has rarely been greater. The whole progressive project needs to work out a fresh relationship with risk and the unfamiliar:

9. Does the fact that Joe Biden, despite Bidenomics, is lagging Donald Trump tell us that economic security is the wrong focus? Or merely an inadequate one?
10. How should the security of belonging to and staying in a certain place be weighed against the security of work that can be attained by moving to a different place?
11. When it comes to the insurance principle, which risks should be collectively insured and which should be left to individual discretion?

Security as capacity: efficiency or resilience? –

That there needs to be a tilt from pure, short-term efficiency to a balance between that and long-term resilience is obvious. But how great that tilt should be is a pressing question as progressives contemplate how much they can capture the real benefits of globalisation, not least specialisation and deeper markets, while adapting to stormier geopolitical times. Then there is the matter of how far governments and firms should go in introducing slack into their budgets and supply chains. Progressives also have a job of work to do in parsing new demands on the state and channelling greater resources towards it – all without curbing private-sector innovation or rendering the state itself too heavy-handed and overbearing. Questions abound:

12. How great does a risk need to be for it to justify investment in additional capacity that will only be

necessary if the danger in question materialises?

13. When they do face absolute choices about government spending, how should progressives navigate rising demands for both military and social spending in an age of turmoil?
14. Where should progressives place the boundary between protecting citizens from crime and disorder and protecting them from the insecurity of the arbitrary or overreaching state?

Conclusion – One of the foundations of Progressive Security is the assumption that progressives are generally good at moving with the times and adapting to change and, in their quest for “freedom from domination”, also more willing to scope out genuinely inclusive solutions to common problems. The picture may at times look gloomy: Trump ahead in the polls in the US, the right now poised to set the agenda of the European Union over its next political cycle, crisis and conflict increasingly on the march. But it will take progressive confidence to claim the topic of security – that fundamental, emotional force of our time – define it afresh, and advance it with the zeal needed. That means interrogating it, understanding its tensions, and knowing how to manage them. Such is the task before the Progressive Governance Summit 2024.

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Progressive Governance Summit 2024

At the Progressive Governance Summits, centre-left parties and leaders from around the globe gather to openly debate the challenges of the future. From Santiago and Copenhagen to Hammanskraal and Berlin – Progressive Governance conferences and summits have been held worldwide since 1999. Since its inception, the conference has gathered leading as well as up-and-coming academics, activists and political decision-makers from around the globe. The Progressive Governance Summit 2024 focuses on making an impactful contribution to shaping a comprehensive concept of progressive security.

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Das Progressive Zentrum

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